

Opinion

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EDITORIAL

Probing wave of pharmacy closures

U.S. Sen. Ron Wyden, a Democrat representing Oregon, has some questions about the causes for a wave of pharmacy closures, most notably those in 56 Bi-Mart stores, including the Baker City store.

The senator is right to ask those questions.

And although the answers he might get likely won't resurrect any pharmacies, perhaps Wyden's efforts can stave off future closures, particularly in rural areas such as Baker County where residents have fewer options for filling prescriptions.

Wyden, who is chairman of the Senate Finance Committee, wrote a letter to Chiquita Brooks-LaSure, administrator of the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, a federal agency. Wyden cited the Bi-Mart pharmacy closures, noting that pharmacies across Oregon have reported as a problem the "direct and indirect remuneration" fees imposed by Medicare Part D plans and pharmacy benefit managers — which Wyden describes as "middlemen."

"I am deeply concerned that the rise of these fees has contributed to the permanent closure of 2,200 pharmacies nationwide between December 2017 and December 2020," Wyden wrote in his letter to Brooks-LaSure.

Wyden also wrote that these fees "can be deployed as anti-competitive tactics" by the pharmacy benefit managers (PBMs) — companies that manage prescription drug benefits on behalf of health insurers, Medicare Part D plans and large employers, among other clients.

Wyden is calling on the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services to review pharmacy closures in the U.S. over the past five years, including the nature and effect of PBM payment practices, and to use the agency's authority to regulate their fees.

That's a good start to addressing a problem that, if recent trends are any indication, might continue to worsen in the years ahead.

— Jayson Jacoby, Baker City Herald editor



Your views

Republicans accept money from Democrat administration

I'm amazed that both Baker County and City governments have magnanimously decided to accept the combined (over 5 million dollars) federal economic relief funds considering how much the city/county leaders and their fellow Republicans seem to hate the current administration and all it stands for. But it seems that they are doing so willingly and with glee! It is much needed funding, for sure. And they're right to take it and use it. They need it. We all need those funds to keep the city/county departments fully funded and to get needed personnel, equipment and training they need to keep us safe and healthy.

Both the city/county will be able to use those federal government emergency relief funds for the many needy departments they operate: fire, police, roads, etc.

But you have to wonder if the city/county would have received those same economic stimulus/relief funds from the Republican nominee who ran for president, and lost. He had shown no inclination to help cities or counties, during his term, unless it benefited him or his "friends." So, now, maybe,

Baker City/County Republicans will be pondering why they voted the way they did. If the current administration seems to be more concerned about the economy of small cities and counties than the Republican nominee would have been, and is providing economic relief for individuals, businesses and governments then, just maybe, they voted for the wrong person. City/County Republican voters must be shaking their collective heads and, maybe, finally, seeing that what Pogo said many years ago is as relevant today (for Republicans in Baker City/County) as it was then: "We have met the enemy and he is us."

Steve DeFord
Prineville

River Democracy Act is another in a series of land grabs

Sen. Wyden and Sen. Merkley have co-sponsored the River Democracy Act of 2021, which has the potential to add 4,700 miles of Oregon waterways to the Wild and Scenic Rivers list. This would be the length of the mighty Mississippi and Missouri combined. Yes, this would be quite a remarkable achievement; it needs to be asked, "is this necessary?"

What more protection is needed?

Our public lands, which includes these waterways, are protected by numerous government agencies that are aided by countless NGOs (non government organizations). No project moves forward without an approval stamp from the NGOs (to name just a few, Nature Conservancy, Wild Earth Guardians, Oregon Natural Desert Association, or Center for Biological Diversity). Just recently the Center for Biological Diversity used its weapon of relentless lawsuits to halt a project in the Ochoco National Forest. These extremist NGOs use litigation as a very effective tool of intimidation.

Access and utilization of the natural resources our public lands provide has decreased with the Wilderness Act and Wild and Scenic Rivers Act. We have rode a wave of continued land grabs under the guise of preserving natural conditions.

The River Democracy Act is one of the most abusive overrides we have witnessed, plus it's an insult to what "wild and scenic" was intended, "protection and enhancement of outstanding remarkable values." Protections exist presently.

D.M. Ballard
Baker City

The troubling trend from Oregon's highways

The most dangerous activity most of us engage in on a daily basis is one we generally consider as routine as brushing our teeth.

Driving an automobile.

So routine, in fact, that I'm sure it wouldn't tax your internet research skills to find a few videos showing people brushing their teeth while driving.

And doing a variety of other things that don't involve steering or braking. Or watching the road.

The notion of the car as a sort of rolling office has become cliché. Except, of course, desks don't as a rule run over pedestrians or collide with oncoming traffic.

The chance of dying during any particular drive is, of course, vanishingly small.

Yet fatal crashes are common enough, and have been for the better part of a century, that it seems to me passing strange that we treat driving with such nonchalance.

Obviously this has much to do with the relative simplicity of operating a car.

Most 10-year-olds, I suspect, have the dexterity and coordination needed to drive a few blocks without crashing, at least at modest speeds.

(Whether they have the height needed to reach the pedals or see over the steering wheel is quite



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another matter.)

Also, we trust 16-year-olds — perhaps trust isn't the most apt verb — let's say we allow 16-year-olds to obtain a government-issued license to drive a car.

I wonder if we would be as sanguine as a society, when it comes to driving, if we were to describe the task more explicitly, which is to say, accurately.

Piloting a 4,000-pound vehicle at speeds of 70 mph is a skill more associated with trained professionals than with teenagers, after all.

Yet for all the inherent risk with such a combination of mass and velocity, travel by car is considerably safer today than it was 20 years ago, or 50 years.

But not as safe as it was less than one decade ago.

This troubles me.

The statistics suggest that the prodigious advances made by automotive engineers, with antilock brakes and electronic stability control and a proliferation of airbags that cocoon occupants of new cars, might have reached an

apex, in terms of their capacity to save lives.

I wonder if we have reached an intersection, so to speak, where technology is no longer capable of thwarting the basic physics of auto travel.

In 2013 in Oregon, 313 people died in traffic crashes, including pedestrians, bicyclists and motorcycle riders.

That was the state's lowest annual death tally since the 1940s.

Even more impressive than that raw number, though, is that the fatality rate dropped to that level despite a massive increase in the number of cars on Oregon's roads — about 3½ million more compared with 1949.

To account for such changes, traffic engineers compile the fatality rate per 100 million miles traveled. In 1949, Oregon's rate was 6.38 deaths per 100 million miles traveled. In 2013 the rate was 0.93.

But the trend didn't continue.

Oregon's annual fatality totals, and rates, have increased in several years since 2013.

From 2013 to 2016, for instance, the death toll rose by 58% while the number of miles traveled in the state increased by just 8.9%.

The fatality rate, after dipping

slightly below 1 per 100 million miles traveled in both 2011 and 2013, has been above 1.18 every year since 2014.

Baker County's annual fatalities during the period have ranged from two in 2013 to seven in 2016 and 2017.

Statewide, 2021 is on pace to be the deadliest year since at least 2013, when there were 512 fatalities.

As of Oct. 18, there had been 450 deaths in Oregon during 2021. That's a 14.2% increase from the same period in 2020.

And then there are those teenagers.

While I was working on this column I received an email from LendingTree LLC that included an analysis of federal traffic crash statistics from 2010 to 2019, the last year for which detailed records are available.

During that decade, the number of fatal crashes in Oregon that involved a driver age 15 to 20 rose by 58% — the highest rate among states.

As the parent of a 14-year-old daughter who already is requesting a copy of the Oregon driver's manual, and a 10-year-old son, this is the sort of statistic that causes me to wake from dreadful dreams in the dead of night.

Assessing these statistics,

and deriving from them possible contributing factors, is the work of months (and of experts).

But this is a subject that bears watching.

It is, of course, impossible to eliminate danger in driving.

People will crash, and no complement of air bags, no installation of cunning computers that apply the brakes during a skid, can overcome the obstinate physical laws I mentioned earlier.

But I'm bothered by the prospect that what we achieved in 2013 was ephemeral, that our roads will inevitably become more dangerous.

I understand, obviously, that the more important factor here is not the machines but the people who operate them.

I hope the researchers who study such things in exquisite detail can pinpoint particular problems with how we drive — problems that perhaps can be mitigated through changes in how we test prospective drivers or issue licenses.

In the meantime I'll continue to leave my toothbrush where it belongs — in its little cup next to the bathroom sink, far from the driver's seat.

Jayson Jacoby is editor of the Baker City Herald.